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ABSTRACT

A study examined practitioners' perceptions about the transition from a scope and sequence of skills approach to reading instruction and assessment to a whole literacy curriculum and portfolio assessment. Subjects, four consultants and eight teachers at one of the seven public elementary schools served by the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii, were interviewed at the end of the first year of implementing the new program and piloting the portfolio assessment. Results indicated that: (1) the transition to the new curriculum and portfolio assessment was difficult for practitioners generally because of traditional conceptions held about instruction and assessment; and (2) teachers who had used the scope and sequence of skills to guide their instruction were concerned that portfolio assessment did not provide them with the same specific instructional targets that they had had previously with traditional mastery tests of skills. (Twelve references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Practitioners' Perceptions of the Transition to Portfolio Assessment

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Running Head: Transition to Portfolio Assessment

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Abstract

This paper summarizes interviews with 12 Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) practitioners about the transition from a scope and sequence of skills approach to reading instruction and assessment to a whole literacy curriculum and portfolio assessment. Four consultants and eight teachers at one of the seven public elementary schools served by KEEP related their impressions in May 1990 of the first year of implementing the new program and piloting the portfolio assessment.

Transition to the new curriculum and portfolio assessment was difficult for practitioners generally because of traditional conceptions held about instruction and assessment. Teachers who had used the scope and sequence of skills to guide their instruction expressed concern that portfolio assessment did not provide them with the same specific instructional targets that they had had previously with traditional mastery tests of skills. In the whole literacy program, teachers were expected to view reading and writing more holistically and take much more responsibility for instructional and assessment decision-making.

Introduction

Proponents of the whole language movement have led the call for "authentic" tasks and materials in classroom instruction. Now, they, and many others in the field of education, are voicing the need for "authentic" or performance-based assessments. In paying heed to these voices, teachers, administrators, and researchers have had to examine their assumptions concerning (a) the conditions which best support children's learning and (b) the most appropriate means by which to assess children's progress in learning.

In 1988, curriculum developers for the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) made extensive revisions to the KEEP reading/language arts curriculum and assessments (Au, 1990). The program was updated to reflect the whole language philosophy in literacy education and to include holistic measures of children's literacy development. KEEP's new whole literacy curriculum was implemented at seven public elementary schools during the school year 1989-90. The implementation process was guided by on-site KEEP consultants who provided teachers with whole literacy program support.

Interviews

In May 1990, Evaluation staff members interviewed KEEP practitioners at a public elementary school on the Leeward Coast of Oahu about their perceptions of the first year of whole literacy curriculum implementation (Yumori, 1991). Eight teachers were interviewed, two at each grade level, from kindergarten to grade three. Of the eight, six had experienced the change-over from the previous KEEP curriculum and assessment to the new KEEP whole literacy curriculum and pilot portfolio assessment. Four KEEP consultants, one at each grade

level, were also interviewed. They supported teachers implementing the new program by supplying materials for classroom use, suggesting instructional methods, demonstrating lessons, and so forth. Finally, teachers and consultants were asked to comment on KEEP's transition to portfolio assessment, a component which was piloted during the 1989-90 school year but not fully implemented until the following year. In these interviews, practitioners reflected on the difficulties involved in moving from old to new forms of assessment.

Traditional Assessment

For many of the interviewees, the biggest difference in the classroom during the first year of whole literacy program implementation, was the absence of the *Kamehameha Reading Objective System* (KROS), a *scope* and *sequence* of reading skill objectives which had previously guided KEEP teachers' instruction and assessment. Under the former KEEP curriculum, students were instructed in a skill and then assessed with a multiple-choice, criterion-referenced KROS test of that skill. Mastery of each skill objective was recorded on a student's KROS *profile sheet*, which listed the entire scope and sequence of reading objectives across listening/reading comprehension, information retrieval, vocabulary, phonics/word structure, and sight vocabulary strands. Teachers could look at a student's profile sheet and tell exactly how many objectives the student had yet to pass on a strand to reach the standard for a given grade level.

Portfolio Assessment

Recent years have seen a significant change in the conceptions of the nature of reading and writing. For example, the definition of reading comprehension has shifted from one that

focused upon specific skills toward one that views reading as a meaning-making enterprise which takes place in a particular social context. The second view has moved curriculum and instruction toward strategic, high-level outcomes, and assessment has come to reflect the new perspective (Hiebert & Calfee, in press).

Under the new KEEP whole literacy curriculum, the generic term, *portfolio assessment*, has been used to refer to the collection of student work products demonstrating both cognitive and affective development in literacy. During the introductory year of portfolio assessment, all students were required to have certain pieces of evidence in their portfolios (Valencia, 1990). The formal data collection periods for these required pieces of evidence were at the beginning and end of the school year. Each student's growth could then be gauged on the six aspects of the whole literacy curriculum by comparing pre- and post-checklist summaries of the student's performance with end-of-grade-level benchmarks.

Six Aspects of Whole Literacy	**Required Evidence**
Ownership of Reading and Writing	Interviews with students and teachers' observations
Writing Process	Students' writing samples
Reading Comprehension	Students' written responses to literature
Language & Vocabulary Usage	Students' responses to literature, writing samples, and voluntary reading logs
Word Reading Strategies	Running records of oral reading (miscue analysis)
Voluntary Reading	Voluntary reading logs and teachers' observations

As it happened, consultants did most of the data gathering and record-keeping for the portfolio assessment at the beginning and end of the pilot year. However, implicit in the portfolio concept was the notion that supplementary pieces of student evidence, not limited to the formats of required evidence, would be added to the portfolio throughout the year by teachers and students. The collection of supplementary pieces was to take place in the context of the on-going instructional cycle, as a natural part of the process.

Transition

Of the six experienced KEEP teachers, four indicated that they had difficulty with the transition from the skills-oriented KROS tests to the portfolio assessment. These four teachers, from kindergarten to grade three, expressed a longing for the structure and specificity of KROS tests to guide their instruction. One teacher said, "When you open the profile sheet, you can see what skills kids need to work on." Another teacher explained, "In KROS, you know exactly what they (students) know--plurals, initial consonants, etc." This teacher saw the portfolio assessment, in comparison, as much more global: "In a portfolio, you can see progress in a child's writing, but it's too broad and not specific enough."

These teachers remarked on the value of the profile sheet for report cards and parent-teacher conferences because it provided information about a student's reading level and functional performance on skills. Some teachers actually continued to use the KROS comprehension tests as a check on their students' reading level and comprehension skills during the first year of whole literacy implementation.

Teachers acknowledged that KROS provided them with clear and specific guidelines for instruction, but several also recalled from the previous year that a lot of time had been devoted to KROS testing. One noted: "I saw a lot of structure with KROS--it was constant assessment. The stress was on children passing the tests."

Among the teachers who mourned the passing of KROS, two came up with the same solution--a combination of KROS scope and sequence and whole literacy portfolio assessment. One explained, "Because we, as teachers, are accountable, we want to know where students are in (terms of) skills." Another teacher agreed, "I would like to see a kind of scope and sequence, so teachers and students would know what they were responsible for during the year. What about going back to the strands on KROS and trying to integrate them with this portfolio assessment?" She admitted that reviewing the objectives her students had passed on their profile sheets had made her feel like she was doing her job. The profile sheet was thus seen as providing proof that teachers were teaching what they were supposed to teach and that students were learning what they were supposed to learn.

Adjusting to the new program appeared to be difficult for new teachers as well. In the past, new teachers had depended upon the scope and sequence of KROS objectives to provide clear instructional targets. One new teacher's comment suggested the possibility that new teachers might not have been getting enough information about the overall philosophy and content of instruction in the new curriculum: "I feel that there is a missing link. I would have appreciated more structure, or knowing what the focus should be. What skills do I need to work on with specific groups?"

However, there were a couple of teachers, who had taught both in the previous program and in the new whole literacy program, who expressed growing confidence in being able to note students' progress in reading and writing by observing what students did in the classroom. One said, "From normal observation, listening to how my students read aloud, I can tell a lot." She continued that she was also able to tell from group discussion whether her students understood story elements such as setting, problem, solution, and so forth; she could then focus her instruction on what her students needed. Another teacher asserted, "As a teacher, you should already know what your students need just by working with them." Both of these teachers emphasized the validity of using their observations to guide their decisions about instruction, a view that is widely accepted and encouraged among whole language and authentic assessment proponents.

According to one consultant, there were also a few teachers, other than those whom we interviewed, who were beginning to value the idea of keeping students' writing portfolios. These teachers kept their students' writing portfolios separate from those of the "official" portfolio assessment. Some teachers encouraged students to select their best pieces for inclusion. One teacher said, "What I've done is keep samples of students' work and look for gains." She noted that showing samples of each student's products during parent-teacher conferences was an effective demonstration to the parents of what their child could do.

Nevertheless, one consultant pointed out, "Teachers see the value in looking at students' products, but how do you translate that to a grade on a report card? How do you decide if

they are currently at grade level or not?" These were some of the thorny questions that practitioners wrestled with during the transition.

Issues in Portfolio Implementation

Assumptions About the Assessment of Reading Comprehension

The KROS tests of reading comprehension and the portfolio assessment's written *response to literature* task were based upon different assumptions about the assessment of reading comprehension. Resnick and Resnick (in press) described the assumptions underlying standardized tests of reading comprehension whose multiple-choice response formats were similar to those of KROS:

> First the passages are short, and the questions favor choppy reading, searching for information in bits rather than interpreting an extended passage with many sections. This testing style reflects the decomposition assumption, treating knowledge and skill as accumulations of isolated pieces of information and not as coherent, interactive systems. Under these conditions, reading comprehension appears to be a matter of finding predetermined answers, not interpreting the written word.

Resnick and Resnick claimed such test exercises have little to do with real reading, thus reflecting the decontextualization assumption.

By contrast, in the portfolio assessment's response to literature task, students are expected to demonstrate their reading comprehension and appreciation of a complete story by constructing their responses to the piece in writing. By the end of third grade, students are asked to write (a) a summary of the story, including story elements and the theme, (b) a personal connection to the story, and (c) a personal response to the piece, stating whether or not they liked the story and explaining why. This could be said to be an authentic assessment

in the sense that it tests for the reading and writing behaviors students are expected to produce in the whole literacy program. In addition, these behaviors could reasonably be expected of participants in the literate community at large.

Task Formats

However, even when authentic assessments replace traditional, skill-oriented assessments, they may still be viewed in a traditional context by those who implement them. For example, one problematic area at the third grade level was the story summary section of the response to literature. Practitioners' comments about the restrictiveness of the story summary format suggested that the task was interpreted quite literally. This was understandable in light of the fact that KROS tests had also been viewed as "carved in stone."

During the year, one consultant observed, "The story summaries were getting close to book reports; it kills fight. I think you can ask kids to do it in other ways." A teacher confirmed, "It was like pulling teeth. The structure itself was not interesting. Maybe instead, students could write a letter to Dear Abby about the problem, so you can see if they can identify the problem." She also suggested having students take the perspective of a character in order to understand first-hand how the character developed. These practitioners' comments indicated that the format of the story summaries was perceived to be much more formalized than they were intended to be for supplementary pieces of evidence. However, the fact that practitioners railed against the perceived restrictiveness indicated that they were beginning to accept responsibility for decisions about what should be included in students' portfolios.

Product vs. Process

The literal interpretation of the assessment task involving story elements resulted in instruction which was, for some teachers, focused on the *product*, the identification of story elements, almost to the exclusion of the *process*. As Resnick and Resnick (1989) stated, "What is assessed is what is taught." One consultant noted, "If you ask for certain things (e.g., story elements), those things get emphasized, and then you're missing a lot of other things." She had to remind teachers that the identification of story elements in story frames was merely an end; that is, it was still necessary to engage students in the process of developing comprehension strategies, such as the Experience-Text-Relationship known as ETR (Au, 1979), and critical thinking that would enable students to achieve that end. Linn, Baker, and Dunbar (1991) expressed concern about this phenomenon:

> High priority needs to be given to the collection of evidence about the intended and unintended effects of assessments on the ways teachers and students spend their time and think about the goals of education.
>
> We should not be satisfied if the introduction of a direct writing assessment led to great amounts of time devoted to [teaching students] to write 20-minute formulaic compositions [or to] a school year spent perfecting portfolio entries.

The emphasis of the product over the process was, again, understandable in light of teachers' reliance on the old KROS scope and sequence of reading objectives. With KROS, what was assessed was definitely what was taught. For teachers, the profile sheets pointed the way for instruction in terms of *what* was to be covered and *when*. The assumption was that if students could pass the test on beginning consonant sounds, they were ready to learn

digraphs and blends. Then they needed to pass the tests on digraphs and blends so that they could move on to the next objective.

In contrast, the whole literacy curriculum benchmarks provided, in a holistic sense, *what* should be covered in instruction. But the *how* of instruction was to be of equal importance; teachers were to focus upon (a) providing meaningful contexts in which to encourage students' literacy development and (b) helping students learn to value literacy. Teachers, therefore, needed to become more attentive to process issues. Moreover, teachers needed to become more aware of process-oriented ways in which students could demonstrate what they were learning.

James Popham (Kirst, 1991) summarized the kinds of transition difficulties schools are generally faced with when they move from traditional to new, authentic forms of assessment:

> In the early days of competency testing, one of the distinguishing features of that (criterion-referenced) test was that it clearly defined the nature of the skill being assessed. It provided teachers with a clear depiction of what it was that they should be pursuing instructionally in their classes. But...what happened over the years was that the very clarity that abetted instructional-design decisions also led to a kind of fragmented, skills-focused approach that, in the end, may have been harmful to a number of students. Now the pendulum seems to be swinging away from specificity. There's an emphasis on measuring more holistic kinds of outcomes. The problem, however, (for those who have used the old approach) is that this shift toward more generalizable assessment targets does not yield the clarity of targets for classroom instruction that we previously had.

Teachers who had relied upon the scope and sequence of skills to guide their instruction experienced a void with portfolio assessment; it did not provide them with the specific targets that they had come to expect from traditional KROS tests of skill mastery.

Teacher Ownership of Assessment

The consultants admitted that their time was taken up primarily with the implementation of the instructional components of the new whole literacy program and that they were not able to help teachers implement the portfolio assessment system much beyond the formal collection of required evidence. However, several consultants echoed the intent of the curriculum developers--that teachers should eventually become much more involved in the assessment and, in effect, take ownership for it. As one consultant said, "It's the teachers' being involved in the assessment process that enables them to become analytical about it and, therefore, effective in instructing kids." Another consultant suggested, "We could invite them (the teachers) to become part of the process of development; it could be something we work on together." Recalling the fact that consultants and aides did all of the record-keeping for the old KROS tests, one consultant said "If teachers have the attitude that KEEP staff does the assessment, then it's not helpful."

Student Ownership of Assessment

The whole literacy program has placed great value upon students developing ownership of literacy. Consistent with this stance is the program's emphasis on student participation in the assessment process. In the past, with KROS testing, students were tested and told the results of the tests but otherwise left out of the process. But, as Steve Seidel (1989) has explained, "Portfolio assessment demands that students come into the center of the assessment process instead of simply being the subject of assessment. Implicit in that shift is the insistence that the work of learning is primarily theirs."

However, even though students' involvement in evaluation activities is valued in the whole literacy program, few avenues were open, during the first year, for them to take part in this process. Just as consultants proposed to involve teachers collaboratively in assessment, teachers needed to learn how to engage students in the same process.

Roberta Camp (1990) stated that teachers who have been involved in portfolio-related techniques want students to become aware of the ways in which they have developed as writers, such that students choose not only their "best" pieces for inclusion in their portfolios, but also those that demonstrate risk-taking and change. She stated, "Students have come to expect that they will reflect on the writing they do and that their reflections will inform their decisions. They are assuming greater responsibility for the decisions they make in their writing and for evaluating the results of their decisions."

Writing teacher, Kathy Howard (1990), offered more insights:

> The key, I think, is to commit to the portfolio process, rather than to the portfolio as just another file, a repository for writing. When portfolio collection, selection, and reflection are used in concert, a very strong and positive message about writing and writing development is sent to students. Students' reflections, in turn, send an equally strong and equally positive message back to the teacher.

During the pilot year of portfolio assessment, teachers who were keeping writing portfolios were basically at the "repository" stage. Consultants and teachers did not have clear ideas about how to work with students on developing goals for writing and selecting pieces which displayed progress toward these goals. There was no evidence of students reflecting

about their writing, about what they thought worked well, what didn't, and what they thought they might try next.

Conclusions

There were many barriers to portfolio assessment implementation during the pilot year. One was time; there were heavy demands placed upon consultants' time to help teachers implement the instructional components of the new program. Next, half of the teachers had difficulty letting go of the previous KROS scope and sequence of objectives and tests because they mirrored traditional conceptions about the reading process and instruction and fulfilled traditional expectations of assessment. Nostalgia for the profile sheet was observed even in cases where teachers were quite enthusiastic about the whole literacy curriculum. New ways of conceptualizing instruction and assessment were required by the whole literacy program; teachers were expected to view reading and writing more holistically and take much more responsibility for instructional and assessment decision making. It was quite a change from KROS.

Practitioners raised many questions about portfolio assessment during the transition. Consultants observed unintended effects of assessment, such as the emphasis on assessment products vs. teaching and learning processes. Both consultants and teachers were concerned about (a) acceptable formats for supplementary evidence, (b) usefulness of data for reporting purposes, and (c) processes in which practitioners and students could engage (i.e., goal-setting, selection and reflection of pieces) to make portfolio assessment meaningful.

Curriculum developers have been encouraging the consultants and teachers to discuss their thoughts and concerns with them. Such an approach, in which everyone participates in problem solving, is more consistent with the whole literacy philosophy than a transmission model of teaching and learning. Program components are thus viewed as dynamic and evolving as practitioners try things out, network with others, and make adaptations.

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